

## **TESTIMONY OF WILLIAM I. GREENER III**

(Bill Greener is a Republican communications consultant. His firm, Greener and Hook assists individual companies, trade associations, an ad hoc groups, as well as Republican candidates and Party organizations. Greener has served in the Ford and Reagan Administrations and as head of the political and communications divisions of the Republican National Committee. He was the Convention Manager for the 1996 Republican Convention held in San Diego).

Madam Chairman:

I would like to thank the Committee for the chance to come before you today to discuss a matter that is near and dear to my heart. It is a privilege to have taken part in the surveys conducted by the Center for Rural Strategies and to have the chance to share some of this information with you. Our most recent report, The State of Life and Politics in Rural America is provided to you as part of my complete written testimony.

When it comes to public policy and public attention, it is my contention the real forgotten American is the individual living in rural America.

If you look at the various statistics, while one can quibble here and there about precise numbers, the broad outline is pretty clear. Approximately 20 percent of Americans live in rural America. By definition, to live in a rural area is to live in an area where folks are spread out, where population density is low. Rural Americans are 20 percent of the population taking up in the neighborhood of 80 percent of the land mass.

20 percent might seem to be a relatively low percentage of the population. Yet according to the exit polls and post-election surveys, 20 percent is slightly more than the combined black (not just African-American, but all blacks) and Hispanic populations.

One certainly can make the argument that black Americans and Hispanic Americans deserve more attention to the circumstances that are unique to their segment of the population. One can argue popular culture needs to more prominently feature black Americans, or Hispanic Americans. At the same time, it would be hard to argue that in terms of public attention, public policy, and popular culture less

attention is given to these segments of the population than is given to rural America.

Save for the occasional story on how people living in rural America may not enjoy the same abundance as other sections of the country, but treasure their way of life, or the infrequent blurb on the scourge of methamphetamine in rural America, when is the last time anybody in this room saw real attention given to the people or the problems of rural America?

This simply will not do. Rural Americans, as the surveys conducted for the Center for Rural Strategies underscore are fully aware their economic situation is bleaker than is the case for the country as a whole. Rural Americans recognize that quality jobs are hard to come by. Rural Americans know the rest of the country thinks the debate pretty much begins and ends with agriculture when the reality is quite different. Rural Americans know their children have less access to a quality education than the rest of the country, that health care is less accessible and less affordable.

The problems that surround rural America will not be addressed, much less solved, in days or months. What is needed, what all Americans should join in demanding is a comprehensive rural agenda, one that extends the discussion well beyond the Farm Bill.

What rural America needs are public policies that stimulate local economies. If someone, or some business, succeeds and grows because a good job is done, that is fine and wonderful. However, and I feel this is as Republican as anything that I could say, it makes little sense to have public policy result in making the big even bigger at the expense of smaller, more locally owned and operated enterprises.

Whether it is Wal-Mart or huge corporate agriculture, it ought not to be a public subsidy that creates an advantage for them over locally owned and operated enterprises. In simple terms, it is my belief that the result of Wal-Mart squeezing out local enterprises is far more wide-reaching than many others might conclude. Whatever is gained in reduced prices is more than offset in lost wages and lost jobs. Moreover, it is not just the Main Street businesses that go broke and out-of-business. The local newspaper that relied on local advertising is crushed. The school band that depended on support from local merchants is harmed. It goes on and on.

We are coming dangerously close, in my humble view, to rural America becoming the equivalent of colonial territory to these huge, remote corporations. The profits they generate are taken away from the local economy in the same ways as the British did in Colonial America. As I said, if it were pure ingenuity and good business practices that accounted for the success of these people, you might be upset in some ways, but you would tip your hat. Instead, the reality is quite different. Too often, it is the public policies that have been established that account for much of what has happened.

I come here today as a Reagan Republican, someone who fervently believes in the magic of the market place, in freedom and opportunity. I also come here today as someone deeply concerned that an important, valuable segment of our population is either being ignored or is the subject of a wide array of public policies that are having a negative impact on their very existence.

I congratulate the Committee for having this hearing, for hopefully starting us down the path of establishing a comprehensive, integrated rural agenda, complete with the sorts of policies that will preserve a way of life while also providing what is needed to guarantee a bright economic future.

Thank you again for this opportunity to appear before you.